

Esparto Unified School District Honored with Golden Bell Award for Transformative Community Schools Program

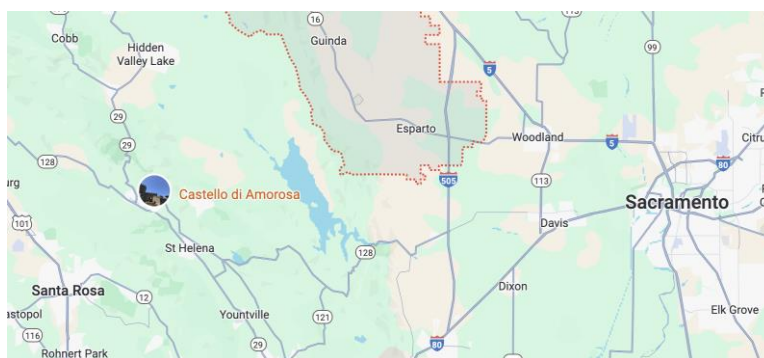
In the heart of California's agricultural landscape, Western Yolo County, California, Esparto Unified School District (Esparto USD) has become a shining example of what can happen when a small, rural community comes together around one shared goal: supporting the whole child. This fall, Esparto Unified's dedication to that mission earned them the Golden Bell Award from the California School Boards Association (CSBA) for their outstanding Community Schools program.

The honor recognizes the district's innovative approach to integrating academics, wellness, and family engagement, work that has fundamentally reshaped school culture and student success.

"It isn't done in a vacuum," said Sherrie Vann, Esparto Unified's Director of Educational and Community Schools. "The coordination with students, parents, staff, and administrators, that's how it grows, and that's how it's become a beautiful transformation."

Building Something Meaningful from the Ground Up

Esparto USD serves just under 1,000 students in Western Yolo County, a close-knit community surrounded by farmland on the outskirts of Woodland and Davis. "Our economy is centered around agriculture," Vann explained. "We're rural, and while we're not that far from Woodland, transportation is a real issue here. Some things that might seem accessible for other people just really aren't for our families." That sense of place, and of the challenges facing small, rural schools, has shaped Esparto USD's approach to its Community Schools initiative.



The story began shortly after the pandemic, when California invested \$4.1 billion to help schools recover from learning loss and address student and family needs. Esparto USD first received a planning grant, which they used to engage deeply with the community.

“With that grant, we were able to really work with our community, our staff, and our students to do needs and asset mapping,” Vann said. “I did nine focus groups, which is a lot in a teeny tiny school district, to get input about what we’re doing well and where we can grow and improve.”

The result of that collaborative work was an implementation grant worth \$3.8 million over five years, allowing the district to expand programming at each of its comprehensive schools. “Each site has similar but different priorities,” she noted. “For our elementary school, one of the top priorities was student outcomes and parent engagement.”



One of Esparto’s standout initiatives is the HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) program, an evidence-based home visiting model that empowers parents to be their child’s first teacher. “We wanted to help engage parents and help them be their child’s first teacher,” Vann said. “That’s really the motto behind the HIPPY program.” Through HIPPY, trained home visitors meet weekly with families over a 30-week program, teaching parents how to lead literacy and math lessons using

hands-on activities. Esparto USD currently serves 45 participating children and families, with hopes to expand. “It’s a beautiful program,” Vann added. “We’re always looking for sustainable funding to continue and grow it. The impact on families has been tremendous.”

The Heart of Healing: SEL and Belonging

A central focus of Esparto’s Community Schools work is building a culture of safety, belonging, and care. “We have SEL paras at all of our school sites,” Vann explained. “They are pivotal and transformational in this work.”

Through braided funding from Student Behavioral Health Incentive Program (SBHIP), CalHOPE, and other sources, Esparto Unified has established wellness centers at secondary sites and calming corners in elementary classrooms. The SEL paras manage these spaces and lead initiatives that promote inclusion, connection, and well-being.

“At the high school, they run a free student thrift store,” said Vann. “It’s all donations from the community, clothing, hygiene products, school supplies, and it’s all free for students to take what they need.”



The SEL team also organizes lunchtime activities like volleyball games, Uno tournaments, open gyms, and even dance-offs at the elementary level to help students reconnect socially after years of pandemic isolation.

“These small, joyful moments matter,” Vann said. “One of our focus groups discovered that students weren’t attending school dances anymore because they felt anxious about dancing. So, the school simply changed the name from a ‘dance’ to a ‘party.’ It was the same event, same DJ, but the word change reduced anxiety and boosted participation. Sometimes the smallest shifts can make the biggest difference.”

Collaboration Beyond the Classroom

Esparto Unified’s success is also rooted in strong community partnerships. During the pandemic, the district worked with RISE Incorporated to provide full-day care for the children of essential workers, ensuring continuity of learning and safety.

In a district where many parents work long hours in agriculture, traditional school schedules don’t always align with family realities. One of the most practical and transformative changes to come from the community focus groups was the addition of before-school care starting at 7 a.m.

“Parents working in agriculture have to be at work very early,” Vann said. “We added before-school care so children had a safe, warm place to be before school opened. It’s been going strong for three years now, and we’ve expanded it to the high school as well.”

At the high school, that early-morning program focuses less on childcare and more on academic support and tutoring, helping students begin the day with confidence and structure.

“That’s part of being a community school, working with your partners,” said Vann. “RISE has been a fantastic partner, especially in mental health and after-school programs.”



The district also partners with the Yolo County Food Bank, Health and Human Services, Vitality Martial Arts, and the Woodland Opera House, among others. These collaborations have brought enrichment programs, food security, and mental health services directly to campus, resources that would otherwise be inaccessible for many rural families.

Listening, Reflecting, and Growing

Esparto Unified's ongoing use of focus groups ensures that decisions are rooted in authentic community feedback. "We aim for 18 to 20 participants, provide dinner during the time, childcare, and share questions in advance," Vann said. "We want a low entry point and a high ceiling."



When the district noticed they weren't hearing enough from Spanish-speaking parents, they held a focus group entirely in Spanish. "It was powerful," Vann recalled. "Parents shared their gratitude and stories. One mother tearfully described how, after a family loss, the school provided mental health support for her children. It was heartwarming and heartbreaking all at once."

These conversations have directly influenced school practices and culture, from improving attendance to refining social-emotional supports.

"The first thing we saw was a huge improvement in attendance," said Vann. "We cut our chronic absentee rate in half in two years. Our ADA improved, and we've seen fewer behavior referrals across all sites."

Recognition and What's Ahead

When representatives from CSBA visited Esparto as part of the Golden Bell validation process, they were impressed by the district's integration of academics, wellness, and family engagement.



“It was wonderful to take them around and show them our wellness centers, our after-school programs, and our HIPPIY program,” Vann said. “They had a lot of nice things to say, and some great advice, too. It was fantastic.”

As Esparto Unified looks ahead, the focus remains on sustainability and continuous growth. Many SEL paras are now training to become certified wellness coaches, ensuring the district can sustain and expand these supports long-term.

“We’re still on a trajectory of improvement,” Vann said. “Our academic data is moving in the right direction, but it’s one day at a time, one kid at a time.”

For a small rural district, that progress, and the recognition that comes with it, is a testament to the power of community-driven education.

A Model for Rural Resilience

Esparto Unified’s story demonstrates that size is no barrier to innovation. With deep community engagement, strategic partnerships, and a shared belief in the potential of every student, the district has created a model that other small and rural schools can emulate.

“Our Community Schools work is really about connection,” said Vann. “It’s about healing, learning, and creating spaces where families and children feel they belong. That’s what makes this award so meaningful: it honors the entire community that made it possible.”